

FRESCO PAINTING.

This branch of art seems destined to experience a revival in England under impulses and circumstances which have been denied, in a national point of view, to other and sister departments of historical commemoration. The standards of excellence in fresco are those efforts of the great masters which adorn the ecclesiastical, and some of the palatial edifices of Italy, and include all names of the greatest celebrity among painters, from the middle of the fifteenth to the close of the seventeenth centuries. The frescos of Michael Angelo and Raffael in the Vatican are familiar from description, and in magnitude, conception, and execution, undoubtedly surpass previous or contemporary examples; but though these have been most frequently seen and admired, the principal churches throughout the papal dominions exhibit the same mode of adornment. A style so productive of grandeur and effect, and harmonizing so perfectly with a ritual essentially commemorative, was cultivated with an assiduity proportioned to its importance; it is indeed to the devotional feeling of past times that we are indebted for the resuscitation of the arts, and through genius and talent, sought and fostered by the munificence of the Roman hierarchy.

The practice of painting in fresco the walls of churches extended to Britain at an early period, and when the artist had not ability to execute pictorial representations, gilding and colour in various fanciful patterns was substituted; remains of which are still visible to some of the older Norman structures. The style itself was co-extensive with the religion that adopted it, differing only in quality according to the capabilities under which it came into use. It was about the time that the Italian and Venetian churches had become replete with these splendid decorations that the reformed religion acquired vigour; and England, the centre of the anti-papal movement, produced in the sequel a genus of fanatics, who, warring not only with ancient altars, but with the throne, succeeded in overthrowing them. The arts, devoted as they had been to church decoration, were now to experience the fury of a crusade directed to the extermination of all similitudes of the human figure; sculptures, carvings, and paintings, whether effigies of kings or saints, whether portraits of miracles or of national achievements, met indiscriminate destruction; art sank with the spirit, and we may say growing refinement, that had been levelled and trodden upon, and for a long season abandoned a country which, we trust, is now to become and continue her favourite seat. It may not, we think, be reasonably objected that these introductory paragraphs have little bearing upon fresco painting; the plain and intelligible understanding we desire to convey on subjects of immediate interest applies here in an especial manner; the encouragement of art, the estimation and reward of its professors, and solicitude preservation of the objects of their labours, are evidences—the strongest evidences—of a feeling which assuredly extends to an exercise of amenities and benevolences which serve to distinguish, and go far to unite a people.

The restoration of Charles II., whose habits had been formed after the French models, brought in those vitiated tastes and manners for which his reign was notorious; the grosser licence and indulgences of the court of his archetype Louis XIV. were adopted, but unaccompanied by a single trait of the redeeming dignity evinced by that monarch. Hence, in interior architectural decoration, the short-lived school beginning with the works of Verrio at Windsor, and closing, of nearly so, with those of Thornhill at St. Paul's, and the painted hall at Greenwich. To pass over the depressed state of art during the reigns intervening between that of Charles II. and the accession of George III., during which interior portrait painting alone was encouraged and remunerated, we arrive at the period when, by royal favour, the often-mooted project for the establishment of an academy of painting met realization. The first president of that institution, Sir Joshua Reynolds, had certainly the merit of being the founder of English historical painting; his plan of teaching, judging from his discourses, was impressive and calculated to raise the art, though the evidences of his skill fall short of the excel-

lence he has so well described in others. The advantage of a protracted residence at Rome had afforded him facilities for study, and he held up the magnificent productions of Michael Angelo and Raffael as models for emulation. Michael Angelo, whose name was the last word pronounced by Reynolds from the chair of the Royal Academy, was the idol of his professional worship, and with abundant reason, as the instigator of that great style which is alone worthy of adaptation for commemorative purposes. But although the president reiterated the merit of these works, applying to them the proper term "Frescoes," he appears to have done so merely to designate the mode in which they were executed, and without any idea, or hint, of the desirableness of cultivating that species of painting in England; neither has it been suggested from the academic chair by any of his successors; in truth, the partial manipulation, to set aside the comparative effect of colour, may not be magically arrived at. It is the institution of a new school; the revival of an art, so far as England is concerned, which painting in oil had entirely superseded. The requirement of appropriate decorations for the new Houses of Parliament has, however, afforded a singularly favourable opportunity for testing the practicability and fitness of the style, and Mr. Barry, though not uniting in his own person all the qualifications of a Michael Angelo, most liberally avails himself of the great occasion in hand to associate the *élite* in auxiliary departments of art; his first invitation has produced the cartoons, an assemblage of efforts giving earnest of future eminence to many names, and removing many doubts as to the amount of latent talent awaiting a stimulus for action.

With respect to the art itself we have heard and read remarks highly unfavourable to its prosecution; of a long novitiate to be passed in its cultivation; of the unsuitableness of climate, of our partiality for exuberant colouring, of the inadequacy of our structures to the reception of examples in this "gigantesque art;" and, lastly, general observations upon the mediocrity of judgment which rules among the vast majority qualified, in a pecuniary sense, to promote the establishment of a high standard of taste. We are not disposed to question the existence of superlatively qualified critics, gifted (it may be) with a presentiment of limits that shall circumscribe and fetter native genius; we find them in other than the more elevated precincts of the fine arts; the legitimate province of criticism as a corrective is generally deferred to, but as a barrier to successive efforts of the thousand, or of the million, its overstraining is to be deprecated. While there may be a few individuals well-informed on the subject of fresco painting, there is much disagreement as to the manner in which examples in many countries were executed. The so-called frescos of Egypt, on the walls of temples and tombs, and those at Pompeii, Herculaneum, Stabia, and the baths of Titus, probably owe a modified preservation to climate, and not to the peculiar manipulation, which constitutes fresco. The ancients were well acquainted with the practice of painting to distemper and water-colours on stuccoed walls, and especially so with the preparation and use of hard, transparent varnishes, proper to the embellishment and preservation of such works; the Italian manner, with an energetic handling of events which sparkle on the pages of British history, and invite a transfer to the palaces and halls of her princes, legislators, and nobles, and of many a deed of individual patriotism or gallantry, which demands commemoration at the hands of British artists. Such works will at once ensure an enlarged acquaintance with our annals, excite a love of art, and an extension of the support due to its professors; and will any critic say that these are not objects worthy the solicitude of a government, and right worthy the cost that may be incurred in promoting them? The peerless imagination of a Michael Angelo, and the exquisite contours of a Raffael may be wanting, but the generous call will meet response from voices loud and musical, from forward spirits to be revealed in embodyments of the sublime and beautiful; and from a still larger class, useful in proportion to its extent, and amongst which genius dwells and revels independent of academic rules. The Burnes and Bloomfields of paint-

ing, though falling short in right conceptions of Milton or Shakespeare; of Norman chivalry, or the wars of the roses; ancient feats of daring, or the tortuosities of modern diplomacy, will be drawn from obscurity to distinction and reward.

BRITISH ASSOCIATION OF ARCHITECTURAL DRAFTSMEN.

Sir,—I have read with pleasure the circular stating the objects of the B. A. A. D., but with all due deference to the members, I beg to suggest that the society should be more extended in its members, and also in its views. Why should not original designs be allowed in object No. 1, of their regulations? as this would tend to bring out latent talent, and would show to the world that architects and builders have been indebted to this class for something more than mere drawing; would oblige the draughtsmen "themselves to think upon these matters, and thus carry out one object of the society, viz. to make themselves more useful to their employers, and consequently enhance the value of their services.

In giving drawings of buildings executed, it would be well that the artist should send a written description of the same, with sketches showing any improvements in design. I may consider could have been made; this would be good practice for himself, would cause discussion, and consequently improvement to all the members present when his productions are exhibited, and it should be open at any time to any member to make such alterations and suggestions, by sketches or otherwise, as they may think proper; by this means many new ideas would arise and be permanently fixed for reference when occasion may require them.

As an example of what may be done in this way, take one of the plain elevations of houses in Wimpole or Harley streets, they being generally of fair proportions, nearly to your hands to receive decoration, with a bold rustic basement, and entrance doors, architraves to the windows, massive balconies, throwing deep shadows, and enriched corners; many of these residences would give grand elevations, and I think there are many of the noblemen and gentlemen living in those houses who if they were aware they could be made handsome at a moderate outlay, would embrace the opportunity of doing so.

There is a doorway to a house in Berners-street, Oxford-street, occupied by Mr. Knight, by Sir William Chambers, the boldness and style of rustic I should like to see introduced into elevations of street houses; but columns on no account should be used as main features, as the frontages are too limited.

With regard to the extension of the membership, why should not almost every description of draughtsmen be included, those engaged in manufactures, such as upholsterers, cabinet-makers, decorators, and others? this would give a variety to the collection of drawings, and by being associated with architectural draughtsmen, would give them an opportunity of improving their taste in composition, and thus, through them, disperse a knowledge of architecture amongst the masses, and until the people are better informed on this subject it cannot be hoped that architecture can flourish; there is much to be done in the improvement of the ordinary dwelling, in its internal decoration, furniture, ventilation, and general arrangements of the plan.

In consequence of there being no place for the exhibition of architectural drawings, except at the Royal Academy, which is very limited, I should hope that one of the main objects of the society would be, after it is established, to have a public exhibition, on a broad and liberal principle, admitting every drawing efficiently well done, including furniture and fittings, as then we might hope that the subject would draw the attention of the ladies, and having once brought them to think and inquire into the principles of architecture and furnishing, we shall find them our best patrons.

These few remarks are penned on the spur of the moment, for the consideration of the members, by one of the fraternity, with every wish for the success of the society so well begun. B.

SOMERSETSHIRE.—On Thursday, the 17th inst., the first stone of a new church was laid by the rev. the special commissary of the diocese of Bath and Wells, at Chantry, in the parish of Whitley, near Frome, Somerset. We understand that no less a sum than 8,000*l.* has been devoted to the object of building and endowing this sacred edifice, to which a school is to be attached by James Fussell, Esq., of Chantry-house, in whose ground it is to stand. The plans are furnished by Messrs. Scott and Moffat, and represent a very beautiful specimen of the decorated period.